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ABSTRACT

This study tested the theoretical proposition that family histories of destructive adult conflict reduce children's emotional security. Subjects were 112 children--ages 6, 11, and 19 years--with equal numbers of males and females in each age group. Subjects viewed the videotapes of an adult couple engaged in either a destructive conflict or a constructive conflict. Next, both groups of children witnessed a standard conflict between the same couple. To assess the impact on emotional security, children were then interviewed concerning their negative emotional reactivity, avoidance of conflict, and internal representations of future adult hostility. Results showed that the destructive conflict histories elicited greater insecurity among children across all three assessment. However, insecurity was expressed in different ways across age and gender. (WP)

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Children's Responses to Adult Conflict As A Function of Conflict History: Testing the Emotional Security Hypothesis

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Abstract

This study tested the theoretical proposition that histories (hx) of destructive adult conflict reduce children's emotional security, as indexed by their negative emotionality, regulation of adult affect, and hostile representations of adult relations. Using an analogue design, 112 children viewed videotapes depicting an adult couple engaged in a hx of: (a) 4 hostile, unresolved arguments (destructive conflict), or (b) 4 mild, resolved arguments (constructive conflict). Next, both groups of children witnessed a standard conflict between the same couple and were then interviewed about their negative emotionality, regulation of adult affect, and internal representations of the adults. Destructive conflict hx elicited greater insecurity among children across all three assessments; although insecurity in response to destructive conflict was exhibited in different ways across age and gender.

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Introduction

Drawing from attachment theory, Davies and Cummings (1994) have proposed that children's sense of emotional security mediates relations between marital conflict and children's psychological problems. Histories (hx) of destructive conflict (i.e., hostile, unresolved) are hypothesized to reduce children's emotional security in subsequent conflict contexts between the adults, whereas hx of constructive adult disputes (i.e., mild, fully resolved conflict) are expected to have little cumulative negative effects. Emotional insecurity is expected to be manifested through several processes, including: (a) children's negative emotional reactivity; (b) avoidance of disputes; and (c) hostile internal representations of adult relations.

Although correlational findings demonstrate links between marital conflict, children's coping, and child adjustment, this research has not: (a) fully assessed the dimensions of emotional security, (b) specified the causal direction and nature of the link, and (c) included subjects across a wide age range in childhood. By manipulating conflict hx (i.e., constructive vs. destructive), the present study provides a test of whether conflict hx casually affects children's emotional security across a wide age range.

Method

Participants. 112 children (6-, 11-, 19-years), with equal numbers of males and females in each age group.

Procedure. Using random assignment, children witnessed videotapes of an adult couple engaged in either a: (a) destructive conflict hx [4 1-min. hostile, unresolved conflicts], or (b) constructive conflict hx [4 1-min. mild, resolved conflicts]. Following the conflict hx, both groups of children witnessed a standard conflict between the same couple. To assess the impact on emotional security, children were then interviewed concerning their: (a) negative emotionality, (b) motivation to avoid the dispute, and (c) internal representations of the quality of future adult relations.

Measures. (a) negative emotionality consisted of mad, sad, scared ratings ("0" = None to "5" = A Whole Lot); (b) avoidance impulses ("0" = absent, "1" = present); and (c) representations of future adult relations ("1" = intense harmony to "5" = intense hostility).

Strategy for Data Analysis

Three-way factorial analyses of variance (ANOVA): Independent variables: (a) conflict hx (destructive, constructive), (b) age (3 conditions), and (c) gender. Dependent measures: (a) mad, sad, scared responses; (b) avoidance, and (c) representations of future adult hostility.

Results

1. Negative emotional reactivity: Children who witnessed destructive conflict hx reported more sadness (M = 1.68, SD = 1.60) to the standard conflict than those who witnessed the constructive conflict hx (M = 1.13, SD = 1.50), $F(1,111) = 4.17$, $p < .05$. For girls, destructive conflict hx elicited greater anger and fear than constructive conflict hx; $F(1,111) = 4.35$, $p < .05$, $F(1,111) = 6.34$, $p = .01$, respectively (Table 1).

2. Avoidance of adult conflict: The impact of conflict hx on children's avoidance strategies varied by gender and age, $F(2,111) = 3.32$, $p < .05$ (see Table 2). For girls, witnessing destructive conflict hx led to greater avoidance than constructive hx only for the 11-year-olds. For boys, witnessing destructive conflict hx elicited greater avoidance than constructive conflict hx only for 6-year-olds.

3. Representations of future adult hostility: A conflict history x age interaction, $F(2,111) = 6.69$, $p < .005$, revealed that destructive conflict hx led to representations of greater future hostility between the adults than constructive hx for 19-year-olds (see Table 3).

Conclusions

Consistent with the predictions of the emotional security hypothesis, destructive conflict hx between adults reduced children's emotional security (Davies & Cummings, 1994). Insecurity, however, was expressed in different ways across age and gender:

1. Negative emotional reactivity: Consistent with the notion that girls can better distinguish between positive and negative characteristics of conflict (El-Sheikh, Cummings, & Reiter, in press), destructive conflict hx generally elicited greater negative emotionality than constructive hx for girls.

2. Avoidance of conflict: 6-year-old boys and 11-year-old girls endorsed greater avoidance after witnessing destructive conflict hx. This supports the hypothesis that boys are more susceptible to stress during childhood, while girls may become more susceptible around adolescence (Cummings & Davies, 1994).

3. Representations of future adult hostility: 19-year-olds who witnessed the destructive conflict hx expected greater adult hostility in the future than those who witnessed constructive hx. This suggests that, during adolescence, children may increasingly view the consequences of conflict within the context of future adult relations (Grych & Fincham, 1990).

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Table 1. Children's Anger and Fear as a Function of Conflict History and Gender.

	Conflict History	
Gender	Destructive	Constructive
Anger		
Boys	1.11	1.64
	(1.45)	(1.81)
Girls	1.86	1.07
	(1.96)	(1.27)
Fear		
Boys	1.11	1.07
	(1.64)	(1.33)
Girls	1.71	0.54
	(1.46)	(0.96)

Table 2. Percentage of Children Endorsing Avoidance as a Function of Conflict History, Age, and Gender.

	Conflict History	
Age x Gender	Destructive	Constructive
Boys		
6-years	63%	13%
11-years	25%	25%
19-years	17%	25%
Girls		
6-years	38%	50%
11-years	88%	38%
19-years	17%	17%

Table 3. Children's Representations of Future Adult Hostility as a Function of Age.

	Conflict History	
Age	Destructive	Constructive
6-years	3.19	2.94
	(1.33)	(2.05)
11-years	3.00	2.75
	(1.37)	(1.34)
19-years	3.83	1.58
	(1.47)	(1.18)